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ABSTRACT

Sexual minority students face issues similar to those of ethnic and racial minority students. This article provides a framework for assessing the community college's inclusion of sexual minority students: lesbians, gays, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals. The first section of the article assesses community colleges in terms of sexual minority issues. Colleges are generally assessed in three functional domains: education, services, and procedures and policies. Figure 1 provides an Institutional Assessment of Sexual Minority Status Checklist that contains several categories within each of the three functional domains. The second section of the article discusses three areas of critical understandings necessary for successful inclusion of sexual minority students: individual development, coming out, and prejudice and discrimination. Figure 3 provides an illustration of issues relevant to the three areas of critical understanding. The third section of the article offers suggestions of best practices for community college leaders. These include getting to know members of the LGBT community, examining the language and symbols used on campus, setting examples as inclusive leaders, and employing a cooperative working spirit. (Contains 29 references and 3 figures.) (RDG)

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'he Courage to Care:
ddressing Sexual Minority Issues on Campus

by Nan Ottenritter

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This article provides a framework for assessing the community college's inclusion of sexual minority students: lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgender individuals. These students face many of the same issues as ethnic and racial minorities. An analysis of their status can lend itself to the understanding of all.

The topic of sex and inclusion of sexual minorities can be difficult. The fact that much of the research and discussion on minority groups has not included sexual minorities says volumes in itself.

Within circles of sexual minority persons, terminology is often unclear. Since *homosexual* often connotes solely *male*, in this paper the term *gay* will refer to male homosexuals and *lesbian* to female homosexuals. Bisexuals are individuals who possess a fluidity of sexuality that moves between attraction/behavior/identity oriented to same-sex and opposite-sex individuals. Transgender persons are those who "re-assign the sex they were labeled [both medically and sociologically] at birth" (Feinberg 1996). To reflect the fluidity of sexuality, authors of current literature use "L/G/B/T" to be inclusive of all groups. The term *queer* is also often used by activists and activist scholars in an attempt to create identity by using and converting the meaning of the oppressive language of the past.

The terms *homophobia* and *heterosexism* both imply the devaluing of sexual orientations other than heterosexuality. However, homophobia connotes more fear, prejudice, and discrimination than heterosexism, while one of the characteristics of heterosexism is rendering L/G/B/T persons invisible. Most of the material and research described here pertains particularly to lesbians and gays. However, all sexual minorities have a great deal in common regarding their relationship to society and the institutions within, therefore useful parallels can be drawn.

At Catonsville Community College, angry responses began as soon as a notice for All Inclusive—the gay, lesbian, and bisexual student group—ran in the spring 1994 alumni newsletter. Mary Hinton, director of annual giving and alumni affairs, says,

> *Five or six graduates wrote to say we were promoting a deviant lifestyle, and others said they wouldn't give to the annual fund. (Van Wallach 1995)*

Community colleges can be assessed, and thereby held accountable, for three functional domains: education, services, and procedures and policies. The above quote reflects a concern found in the services domain. The following Institutional Assessment of Sexual Minority Status Checklist describes the three functional domains by highlighting areas found within those domains. "Prompt questions" are then provided to guide the reader in reflecting upon some of the L/G/B/T minority issues found in each area *(see figure 1)*.

...all sexual minorities have a great deal in common regarding their relationship to society and the institutions within.

Upon reviewing the list, one can see that inclusion of sexual minority students is an institutional affair. Campus climate and social climate are at least as important as textbook content in the creation of an equitable environment. Why are these three functional domains (and their accompanying areas) so important to the lives of L/G/B/T persons in the campus community? Why are they so important to everyone in the campus community?

> *I probably could have been involved a lot more, but I didn't feel like it. All of the girls were talking about their boyfriends. My psychology teacher let it be known that gay issues were not to be talked about. So, I held back. I wasn't going to risk my neck. (Anonymous lesbian student)* 1

The measure of our humanity is found in how we regard those who are considered the "least" of us, and the denial of opportunity for

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Figure 1-- Institutional Assessment of Sexual Minority Status Checklist

EDUCATION

1. Curriculum

- ❑ Are L/G/B/T appropriately included in textbooks and materials used in class?
- ❑ Are there any stand-alone courses on L/G/B/T history, theory, etc.?
- ❑ Are there any programs of study on L/G/B/T history, theory, etc.?

2. Instructional Supports

- ❑ Are there L/G/B/T resources in the college library?
- ❑ Is physical space allocated for a L/G/B/T resources collection or studies center?
- ❑ Have student computer labs been assessed for equal Internet access to L/G/B/T Web sites?

3. The Classroom

- ❑ Has a safe climate been created in which L/G/B/T issues can be raised and discussed, as appropriate to the course?
- ❑ Are interactions with L/G/B/T students equitable?

4. Health Centers and Health Fairs

- ❑ Are L/G/B/T groups and agencies represented at health fairs?
- ❑ Is inclusive language used? i.e., use of *partner* instead of *girlfriend* or *boyfriend*?
- ❑ Do health center staff address the health concerns of L/G/B/T students and staff in a non-judgmental way? i.e., not assume that every student is heterosexual, be aware of health needs particular to L/G/B/T students and staff?
- ❑ Is confidentiality regarding sexual orientation honored and/or required?
- ❑ Are referrals made to L/G/B/T community services when appropriate?

SERVICES

5. Groups

- ❑ Are L/G/B/T groups welcomed and supported? i.e., through use of SGA funds and school facilities, availability of advisers, etc.?
- ❑ If there are affinity groups in the overall alumni support structure are L/G/B/T groups included?

6. Activities

- ❑ Are L/G/B/T-oriented programs included in the social/educational/entertainment programming by the SGA and other campus groups?
- ❑ Are L/G/B/T resources provided along with other student support resources at orientations, counseling and advisement, etc.?

7. Residence Life

- ❑ Is a safe living environment provided for L/G/B/T persons?
- ❑ Is there housing for same-sex partners?

PROCEDURES & POLICIES

8. Compliance

- ❑ Is the institution in compliance with federal, state, and local laws/policies? i.e., "Don't ask, don't tell" policies in ROTC programs, governors' executive orders, state laws regarding same-sex marriage, etc.?
- ❑ Has the institution established its own policies to affirm L/G/B/T faculty and staff? i.e., nondiscrimination clauses, collegial support for L/G/B/T staff and their partners, etc?

9. Employee Rights/Benefits

- ❑ Are domestic partner benefits offered?
- ❑ Are staff development opportunities for prejudice reduction and education about L/G/B/T issues offered?

10. Campus Safety

- ❑ Is there a mechanism for reporting hate crimes on the campus?
- ❑ Are staff members trained in how to mitigate conflict and reduce prejudice in their interactions with students?

11. Grievance Procedures

- ❑ Is there an effective grievance procedure that clearly states the policy, breaches of the policy, and sanctions for harassment, discrimination, and other offenses?
- ❑ Are all constituencies on campus aware of the procedures?
- ❑ Do the procedures operate in a timely and effective manner?

12. College Constituencies

- ❑ Are L/G/B/T persons visible members of different college constituencies, i.e., the faculty senate, administrative groups, student government association, etc.?

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some results in the denial of their gifts to all. No one knows how the student quoted above could have contributed to her college community. No one knows how she could have grown had the college community been open to her. Yet, on a grander scale, community colleges do know these things.

As one of the premier "democratizing" institutions in America, community colleges have long acknowledged their importance to the lives of many. Policies of open access ensure opportunities for nearly all in our society. Look at the mission statements of most community colleges. They include:

> *maintaining a comprehensive and dynamic curriculum; promoting critical and creative thinking and academic honesty; supporting the personal and academic success of students; educating students for responsible citizenship, civility and mutual respect in a multicultural and global society; creating alliances with and beyond the college district; and advancing a college organization that learns continuously through team effort and draws upon everyone's talents, work, and creativity. (College of DuPage 1995)*

Knowing all of this—the importance of every individual, the community colleges' mandate to serve, the need for educators to shift from a monocultural to multicultural perspective, the disproportionately high suicide rate among lesbian and gay adolescents (Gibson 1989), and the consumer-driven nature of higher education- (lesbians and gays alone make up approximately 10 percent of the population (O'Connor 1991), so they account for a substantial contribution to the college), — what's needed to advance us beyond our present level of inclusion and understanding of L/G/B/T persons? There are three areas of understanding: individual development, the coming out process, and the nature of prejudice and discrimination.

Critical Understandings

The first area of understanding concerns that of **individual development**. Eric Erikkson stated that life experience is produced through the interaction of the biological, psychological, and societal systems. We experience different developmental challenges at different points in our lives; movement through a sequence of stages from birth to death requires successful completion of the developmental challenges of the previous stage (Newman and Newman 1995).

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Eighty-four percent of community college students are younger than 39 (IPEDS 1995), the time of life when people solidify gender

Figure 2-- Community College Enrollment Age Distribution

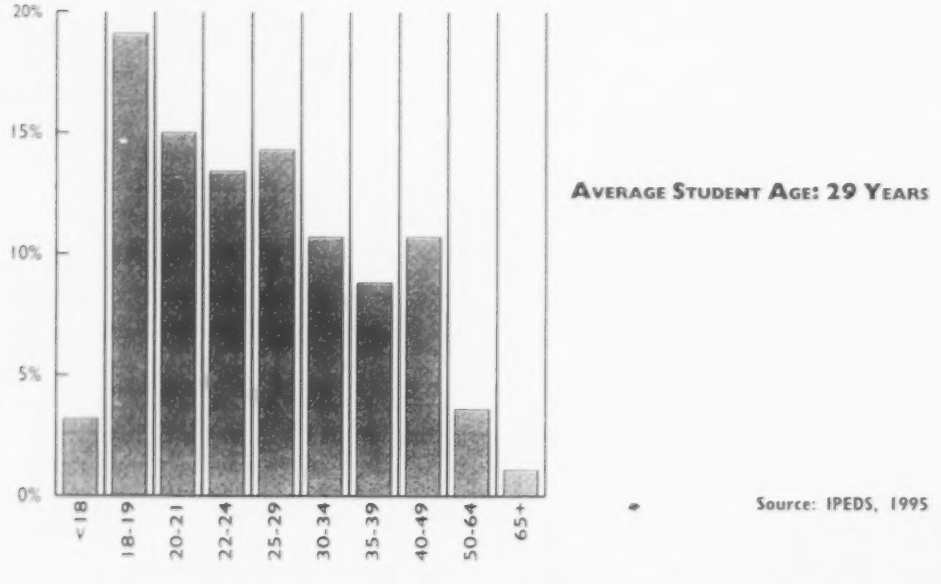

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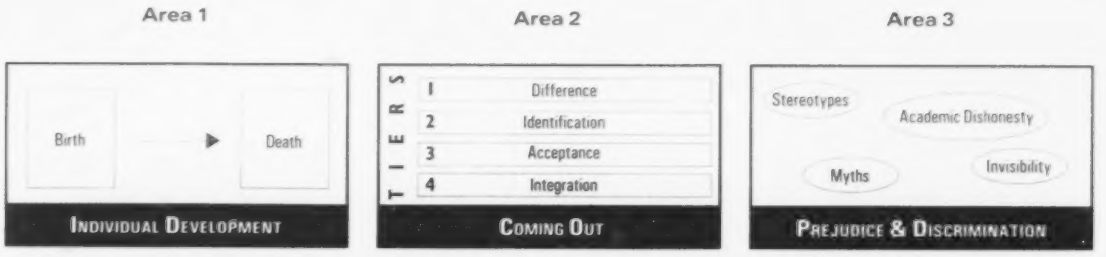
Figure 3-- Three Areas of Critical Understandings



Interaction of biological, psychological and societal systems

Emergence of sexual identity through a succession of developmental stages

Understanding the extent to which campuses welcome the presence of L/G/B/T persons.

Not only do community colleges serve sexual minority students, they also serve their families, train their caregivers, and interact with their communities.

identity and explore sexual relationships and forms of intimacy. What supports do community colleges provide for students and staff alike to accomplish these developmental tasks? Colleges provide role models for students and establish norms for permissible topics of conversation. Through cocurricular programming community colleges create safe spaces for students to develop social skills such as dating. College classes also provide opportunities to learn and think about human relationships, health, and personal development.

In order to heighten the awareness of individual development for L/G/B/T persons, let's reframe the question: What supports do community colleges provide for L/G/B/T students? When community colleges have teachers, staff members, and students who are "out" (that is, have disclosed their sexual identity), there are role models. Role models can be important for lesbians and gays because they help to counteract widely accepted myths and can also help in *stigma management*. When partners/significant others or L/G/B/T issues are discussed in the lunchroom, critical thinking has been promoted. When L/G/B/T clubs are chartered as part of student government associations, same-sex couples are welcomed to the dance floor, and family discounts are offered, students have been educated for responsible citizenship, civility, and mutual respect in a multicultural and global society. When developmental psychology texts discuss same-sex coupling, mental health courses explore homosexual attractions, and health courses acknowledge same-gender sex, academic honesty has been achieved.

> *I have said to you to speak the truth is a painful thing. To be forced to tell lies is much worse. (Wilde 1909)*

The second area of understanding concerns that of the *coming out process*. At the same time that L/G/B/T persons are progressing through Erikson's developmental stages, they are also progressing through stages in the coming out process. This is a unique characteristic shared only with others who belong to invisible minority groups, for example those who have a learning disability. The case of a gay adolescent will illustrate the point. The boy's family typically does not know or acknowledge that he is gay, so he must assume the burden of informing them and risk possible expulsion from the family and home. In many instances, he has not had a gay culture with which to identify and has been quite isolated in his experience of sexuality and community up until this point. This experience is different from, say, an African American adolescent growing up in an Afrocentric home and community.

There have been many models formulated to describe this coming out process (Cass 1979; Myers et al. 1991). In an effort to consolidate these models and provide a brief, yet understandable framework, consider a Room of Life model (Ottenritter 1995). The "rooms" of all lives are decorated with possessions, events, values, and beliefs. People decorate,

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accessorize, and rearrange all of these as deemed fit. The room of an L/G/B/T person has a mobile hanging in the middle. This flexible, moving piece of art represents sexual identity. It can be bumped into, walked around, seen through, decorated and celebrated, or disguised and hidden. The tiers of the mobile represent the four stages of sexual identity formation: *difference*, *identification*, *acceptance*, and *integration*. The stage of *difference* lies close to the ceiling, while *integration* lies close to the ground.

Difference involves feelings of marginality, not "fitting in." There is no conscious awareness of the mobile, yet its presence is most certainly sensed and it influences behavior. This first stage was suggested in Janice Ian's song *Seventeen*. Years later she came out as a lesbian.

In the stage of *identification*, there is a great deal of confusion. The mobile is now recognized as a possible homosexual orientation. Confusion abounds as feelings and attractions clash head-on with societal norms. The anxiety produced is the result of a cognitive dissonance that pushes for resolution through alienation and isolation or reaching out to others. The mobile in the room of life is now a focus of interest and interaction.

Closer to the ground (and to being grounded), is the stage of *acceptance*. Could a magic wand of sexual orientation be waved, the person's wish would be to remain gay. Social contact with other lesbians and gays prevail, with some, to the point of possibly dichotomizing the world into straight and gay. Some people become involved in political activity. For all, the mobile has assumed great importance in their room of life, making it a greater part of that room.

The last stage, of *integration*, is the stage of congruency. Homosexual identity is recognized as one of several core identities with which one identifies. The cognitive dissonance of the past has been resolved. The mobile has now become a balanced part of the room of life. One has the ability to freely shift focus to and from the mobile and other aspects of the room.

The importance of understanding this model can be found in two domains: individual and institutional. It is important to recognize that just as students are at different stages in their life development according to Erikson's model, L/G/B/T students are at different stages in their coming out process. Programming and services need to provide for this full range. A reticence to talk in class may be considered as a natural part of the stage of difference. The choice of a homosexual theme for a psychology paper may be the first step in the stage of identification in which a person can use the terms *lesbian* and *gay* and study homosexuality. L/G/B/T political activism can be an indicator for the stage of acceptance. A staff member's inclusion of their partner at the staff holiday party may be seen as a statement of integration.

The other side of this picture is that L/G/B/T persons are always coming out. In becoming a new member of any group, they must constantly make choices on how to manage the process. Not only do community colleges serve sexual minority students, they also serve their families, train their caregivers, and interact with their communities. The members of these constituencies may be at their own stages in the coming out process, not for themselves but in their roles as someone in relationship with a person of sexual minority status.

One of the greatest burdens of all oppressed people is internalized oppression.

The second area of importance concerns the use of this model as a guide for institutional assessment. While the Institutional Assessment of Sexual Minority Status Checklist highlights important areas of intervention, the Room of Life model describes the journey toward integration. For the individual this concerns sexual identity. For the institution it concerns becoming an institution that is not only welcoming of sexual diversity but has woven acceptance of sexual minorities into its fabric. Perhaps your institution is at the stage of difference, skirting around sexual minority issues. Perhaps it is in the midst of turmoil as honest recognition of one of its constituencies clashes with community norms. Perhaps the campus has moved into acceptance, refuting attempts to eliminate *sexual orientation* from the nondiscrimination clause. Perhaps it is in the stage of integration in which, for instance, the L/G/B/T student club is just one more group clamoring for funds.

> *We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. (King, Jr.)*

The third area of understanding harkens back to the "democratizing" function of community colleges and concerns understanding the nature of prejudice and discrimination. Prejudice is formed and fueled by stereotypes,

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myths, academic dishonesty, and invisibility of oppressed peoples. In a discussion concerning why student affairs personnel do not attempt to provide a just and supportive environment for L/G/B/T persons, Marszalek (1995) cites the belief that providing a supportive environment means the same as advocating a L/G/B/T lifestyle. This is one myth surrounding sexual minority persons. Another belief is that students will report a greater willingness to engage in gay positive behaviors following exposure with gay and lesbians, for instance, on a speakers panel. This hypothesis was not supported in a study by Reinhardt (1994).

One of the greatest burdens of all oppressed people is internalized oppression, the tendency to self-censor according to societal beliefs. Persons of sexual minority status live daily with internalized homophobia and heterosexism. The activation of prejudice results in discriminatory practice that flourishes, at times, because of simple hatred and, at times, because of simple inattentiveness. The Council on Interracial Books for Children of the National Parent and Teacher Association (1983) cites the following reasons for preparing a special bulletin in homophobia and education: (1) homophobia oppresses at least one-tenth of our population, (2) homophobia is the ultimate weapon in reinforcing rigid sex-role conformity that oppresses all females and limits male options as well, and (3) young people are generally appallingly misinformed about homosexuality. In the community college's quest to impart democratic ideals, the creation of life-affirming community college environments for persons of sexual minority status is simply the next step in the quest for social justice.

Best Practices

Community college leaders need not reinvent the wheel. While sexual minority issues remain difficult for many, there are institutions and leaders who have made great progress. The American Council on Education's 1989 publication *Minorities on Campus: A Handbook for Enhancing Diversity* provides important institutional program descriptions and contacts for minority issues in general. Their important strategies include: recognizing climate as an issue, recognizing the issue belongs to everyone on campus, providing education and training, involving students, keeping an eye on the classroom, paying attention to symbols, building a critical mass of minorities on campus, cultivating pluralism in cultural and extracurricular activities, and establishing a policy and mechanism for dealing with bias. Many of the resources cited at the end of this chapter provide guidance for dealing specifically with L/G/B/T issues.

What can one person, regardless of position on the community college campus, do? The following tips have been gleaned from community college leaders across the nation:

- ***Personalize and put a face on your efforts.*** **Get to know your L/G/B/T students and colleagues. Learn about their world and share yours with them. Invite L/G/B/T persons to the college to speak. Changes efforts are made more for people than for causes.**
- ***Be a challenger.*** **Challenge the language and symbols present on your campus. Are they inclusive? Remember that social context is defined, to a large degree, through language and symbols.**
- ***Be a leader.*** **Help in setting inclusive policies, modeling just behavior, and bringing difficult issues to the table. Invite students, faculty, administrators, community members, and representatives of all minority groups. Model the inclusive situations you seek.**
- ***Be a team player.*** **Be direct and assertive and willing to meet conflict in the spirit of creating common ground. Seek out support from colleagues, community members, students, and others as you go about this work.**

Minority issues are complex affairs. Values and beliefs that lie close to the heart undergird discussions of minority concerns. Assuring that the needs of sexual minority students are met can be particularly complex and troublesome for community college leaders. Yet community colleges have the rare privilege and challenge of bringing *community* back to the lives of many Americans.

> *Community must be defined not only as a region to be served, but also as a climate to be created in the classroom, on the campus, and around the world. (Commission on the Future of Community Colleges 1988)*

If the values of these communities are about inclusivity and social justice, then the needs of sexual minority persons must be included as well. And those who work for these goals should be upheld and supported as they work to fulfill the missions of their community colleges. RV

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